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How SMS has changed relationships

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HAMBURG - There is space for just 160 characters on that little mobile phone screen, but it's enough to make a fool of yourself in late-night drunken texting the ex or over-texting your new love interest.

Text messages are both a curse and a blessing - above all when they are used in new relationships or to flirt.

The question is not simply whether to send a text message, but what to write and when to send it.

And after a message is sent, what if there's no reply? The waiting begins. Flirting in the time of text messages is not only easier, but more immediate.

"The speed takes a bit of the tension away," said Jan Schaumann, a behavioural consultant in Berlin.

It also shortens the anticipation time between dates. But used correctly, text messages have a value, provided they are not over-used at the beginning of a relationship.

"Mobile phones make possible a completely different time span in which one party contacts the other," said Nina Deissler, a flirt coach in Hamburg.

Once there was a standard grace period of two to three days before a man called a woman after their first date.

In the 21st century, it's not unusual for the phone to ring on the way home.

"I find the message, 'get home safely,' acceptable," said Deissler.

"It shouldn't be more than that."

Style adviser Susanne Helbach-Grosser in Schwaebisch Gmuend is stricter.

She finds it "extremely importune" when a woman sends a man a text message immediately after a date asking for another one.

She advises waiting at least a day. The pressure and the immediacy of mobile phones are exactly the problem.

No one, it seems, is completely out of touch any more. The emphasis on accessibility is changing the nature of romantic relationships.

The old boundaries of varying emotional distance and closeness are changing, and with them traditional relationship dynamics.

"There is hardly a way to escape it because you know that the message is delivered immediately or you know your number will appear on the caller ID," says Helbach-Grosser.

Couples counsellor Felicitas Heyne of Herxheim, Germany says the arrival of a text message doesn't mean that it will be read right away or reacted to immediately, particularly in the early stages of a relationship.

Texting is not always the most literate way to communicate. Abbreviations and mistakes are open to misinterpretation.

"Sometimes the writer doesn't use his or her brain," said Heyne, who warns against over-interpreting poorly phrased texts.

"A little bit of distance and calmness are certainly helpful to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings."

Part of getting to know someone is finding out how he or she handles modern communications, what type of messages he or she sends, when and how many.

With all the social advances women have made, it still stands that she wants to be pursued.

"Thus, the first text message should come from him," said Heyne.

Although some modern women would debate that dynamic has also gone by the wayside.

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